TL4755-2

WHO SAID WHAT

Distribution of two leaflets calling for debate and action over the situation in East Timor sharply divided the Assembly in an hour of debate on the fourth day of the CCA Assembly (29 June). The leaflets were distributed by members of the CCA Youth Forum. One of the leaflets, the Youth Forum newssheet 'Ham Seong' No 4, carried a front page story titled 'The People Who Never Smile'. It included a harsh cartoon depicting delegates departing for the CCA Assembly apparently ignoring the suffering and dying of the people of East Timor.

Mr Frans Tumiwa, of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia, objected to the distribution of the material on behalf of the Indonesian delegation to the Assembly and requested withdrawal of the material. After consideration of the request, the Steering Committee pointed out that the papers were not official documents of the Assembly and the views expressed had not been discussed by the Assembly. They left it to the Assembly to decide on the issue of withdrawal of the material.

Mr Abisheganaden of the NCC Singapore, opened the debate saying the material should be withdrawn and expunged from any record of the Assembly. The Rev David Gill of the Uniting Church in Australia, supported the call for withdrawal of the material. He pointed out that the 'Ham Seong' article "implies that the Uniting Church in Australia has endorsed the document which we have not seen and have not endorsed". He also said he was embarrassed as an Australian that the second leaflet, which was published in Australia, by Christians in Solidarity with East Timor, implied that the Australian delegation supported the views contained in it. "I recognise that the issue of East Timor is a major concern, but I'm not convinced that the language of confrontation is the best way for the churches to address the issue" he said.

Mr Jesudas Athialy of the Marthoma Church, India pointed out that no one had challenged what had been written in the documents about the situation in East Timor. "Amnesty International, Red Cross and many other international organisations have spoken out over this issue. It will be a sad day if the CCA fails to rise to its prophetic role" he said.

The call for discussion on the issue within the CCA was supported by Bishop Robert Longid of the Episcopal Church in the Philippines who said: "part of the history of CCA is that we listen to both sides. If we talk about justice, CCA must listen to both sides and we should create a forum to do so".

In response to the call for a debate, the Rev Nico Radjawane of the GPM Church, Indonesia said he would be sorry if the East Timor issue was to be discussed as the Communion of Churches in Indonesia had not been invited to prepare information on the situation. Referring to the Niles Memorial Lecture by Dr Dharmaputera, he reminded people that limits apply to the Indonesian Churches but the churches "are struggling with the issue of East Timor and Irian Jaya".

Mr Fructuoso Sabug of the NCC Philippines responded saying the issue is not the documents, but the issue of East Timor: "Why are the Indonesian Churches so afraid of this issue?" he asked. "We must find a forum to discuss the issue."

The Indonesian view was reiterated by Dr Bert Supit of GMIM Church, Indonesia expressing deep concern at the insulting nature of the cartoon, "I see myself as this fat person attending CCA, leaving my brothers dying at home. I feel oppressed, being dominated at this Assembly by a certain idea" he said.

The debate closed with the Assembly agreeing that "the paper of CCA Youth Forum No 4 is not an official document of the CCA Assembly and the views stated in the document were not discussed or cleared through this Assembly and that it should be withdrawn".

Youth Response

The Youth Forum's response, an editorial in the Monday edition of 'Ham Seong', accused the Assembly of a"heresy of good ecumenical relations." "This involves keeping smooth and tidy relations between ecumenical bureaucracies and between churches while relegating issues of injustice to occasional consultations... or simply sweeping them under the mat" states the Editorial.

Referring to their front page story on Saturday, 'Ham Seong' said the list of churches, councils of churches and other church groups, "adds up to a considerable groundswell of ecumenical opinion".

Whilst indicating "no personal offense was intended" the 'Ham Seong' editorial went on to charge that the Assembly's failure to address the East Timor question was "a dark stain on the conscience of the Asian Churches".

The Youth Forum called for CCA International Affairs to hold a consultation on East Timor at which all sides can be represented, and looked "forward to a healthier process for dealing with this issue in the future".

East Timor Visitor

Meanwhile, East Timor Catholic priest, Father Francisco Fernandes still waits for an opportunity to speak to the delegates. "I risked my life in order to get here to speak on behalf of my people" he told a lunchtime gathering of friends. "I'm not here to accuse or blame anyone, but simply to voice the suffering of my people and my country" he said.

The Rev Kunihiro Sato, Moderator of the NCC Japan told the lunchtime gathering "My country invaded many other countries in the 1940's. We people in Japan were completely under the control of information from our government. We did not know what was happening".

"This is a confession from me and a kind of advice not to follow our history. We Japanese delegates stood up on this issue not to condemn but because of our history" he said.

RR